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## Democrats Decline to Take Up Unfinished Spending Bills

By CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON, Dec. 11 — Congressional Democrats said Monday that they would not try to finish multiple spending bills left hanging by the departed Republican majority. Instead, they want to keep most government agencies operating under their current budgets until next fall.

In a joint statement, the incoming Democratic chairmen of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees said the urgency of new business and the administration's next spending request for the war in Iraq gave them little choice but to abandon efforts to pass the overdue bills.

"While the results will be far from ideal, this path provides the best way to dispose of the unfinished business quickly and allow governors, state and local officials, and families to finally plan for the coming year with some knowledge of what the federal government is funding," said the statement from the chairmen, Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Representative David R. Obey of Wisconsin.

The Republican-led 109th Congress, which adjourned early Saturday, completed only 2 of 11 spending bills due Oct. 1. This was because of a variety of reasons, including Republican divisions over spending levels and a desire by the party leadership to spare lawmakers from tough votes before the Nov. 7 election.

Except for the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security, the government is being financed under a stopgap "continuing resolution" signed early Saturday by President Bush. It expires Feb. 15, and Democrats said they planned to extend a similar resolution through Sept. 30.

The unfinished bills loomed as a potential major distraction for Democrats as they prepare to take power in January, a fact not lost on the Republicans who chose not to try to complete the work. The two Democrats made clear that they would rather concentrate on the first budget under their party's leadership while giving close scrutiny to the president's own spending plan and his request for war spending.

"We, in the new Congress, have a responsibility to build the foundation for a better future," the Democratic chairmen said. "We cannot begin that work until we fix the problems left behind by the Republican Congress. So, we must turn the page on the Republican failures and work together in the best interests of the American people."

Some Republicans favored not finishing the bills because of automatic savings achieved by forgoing expected spending increases in any new measures. Both Democrats and Republicans say that operating under current budgets, in some cases with less money, can strap federal agencies and lead to lapses in service.

While the Democratic chairmen suggested they would try to accommodate agencies that needed more money, they said the final spending resolution would not include any earmarks, the pet projects sought by lawmakers for their districts and supporters. As a result, if lawmakers revive earmarks included in the bills that stalled, those projects will face scrutiny under new rules that Democrats intend to adopt.

Congress has struggled in recent years to enact spending bills on time, and lawmakers have repeatedly ended up merging them into huge so-called omnibus measures or pushing them into the next calendar year. Mr. Byrd and Mr. Obey said the last time the measures were passed individually and signed on time by the president was 1994, when the same two lawmakers were chairmen of the spending panels.